

**Brooks Haxton**



## QOHELETH

I used to think the Preacher meant by vanity  
the sin of pride, but it was emptiness.  
He said, Emptiness of emptinesses.  
All is emptiness. Third from the last verse  
of his little book is a note to himself and us:  
“Of making many books there is no end.”

## LOVE AND EMPIRE

1.

Napoleon in exile kept two locket, one  
from the late Marie Walewska  
with a snippet of blonde hair, the other  
remembering Josephine with violets  
he picked beside her grave. As for himself,  
he asked that his heart in spirits of wine,  
preserved in a dish of silver welded  
shut, be given to the second  
empress, who survived him.

2.

Widowed at thirty, jailed  
by Robespierre, made  
courtesan by his successor,  
Josephine, when she laughed, hid  
her ugly teeth behind her hand.

3.

Napoleon two days after the wedding left for war.  
He said in a letter to his wife, he longed to kiss  
her breast, “and lower down, much lower.” Her replies  
were cool and few; her dalliances with his rival, not.



4.

Sick of his wife's adulteries, Napoleon in Egypt  
saw a woman smiling with good teeth  
and sent her husband as envoy to France.  
The smiling woman stayed, and with the wives  
of other officers she visited the general's house  
for lunch. A parlormaid filling the water glasses  
tripped and drenched the woman's dress.  
Napoleon, as though surprised, leapt up,  
and led his guest into a private room where,  
he insisted, she could "repair the damage."

5.

Marie Walewska, faithful as a wife  
at twenty-one, according to her own  
account, had spurned Napoleon.  
But when he smashed his watch,  
and swore that he would shatter  
Poland, thus, were she not his,  
she fainted, wakening after the rape  
to find him soothing her, as if in love.

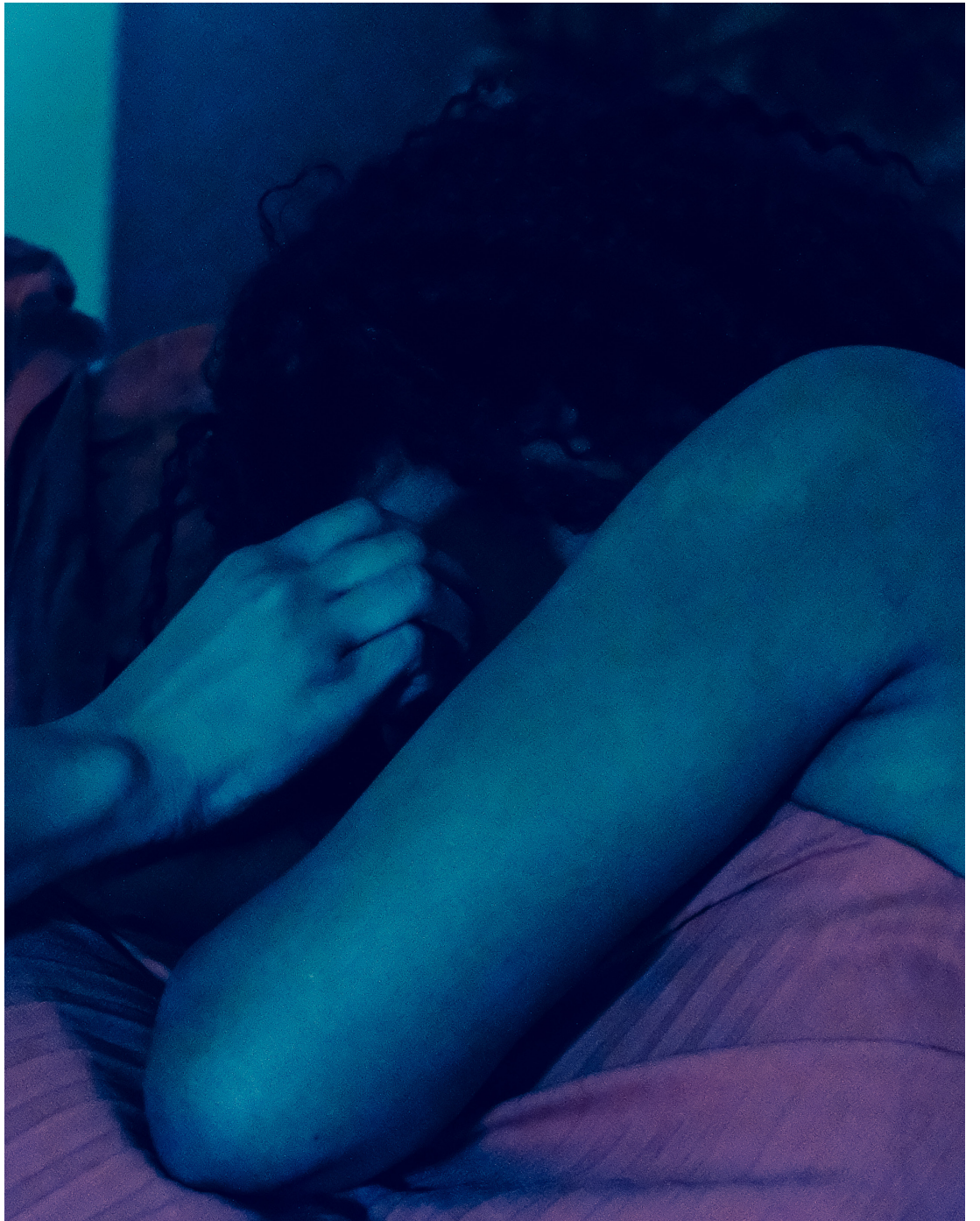
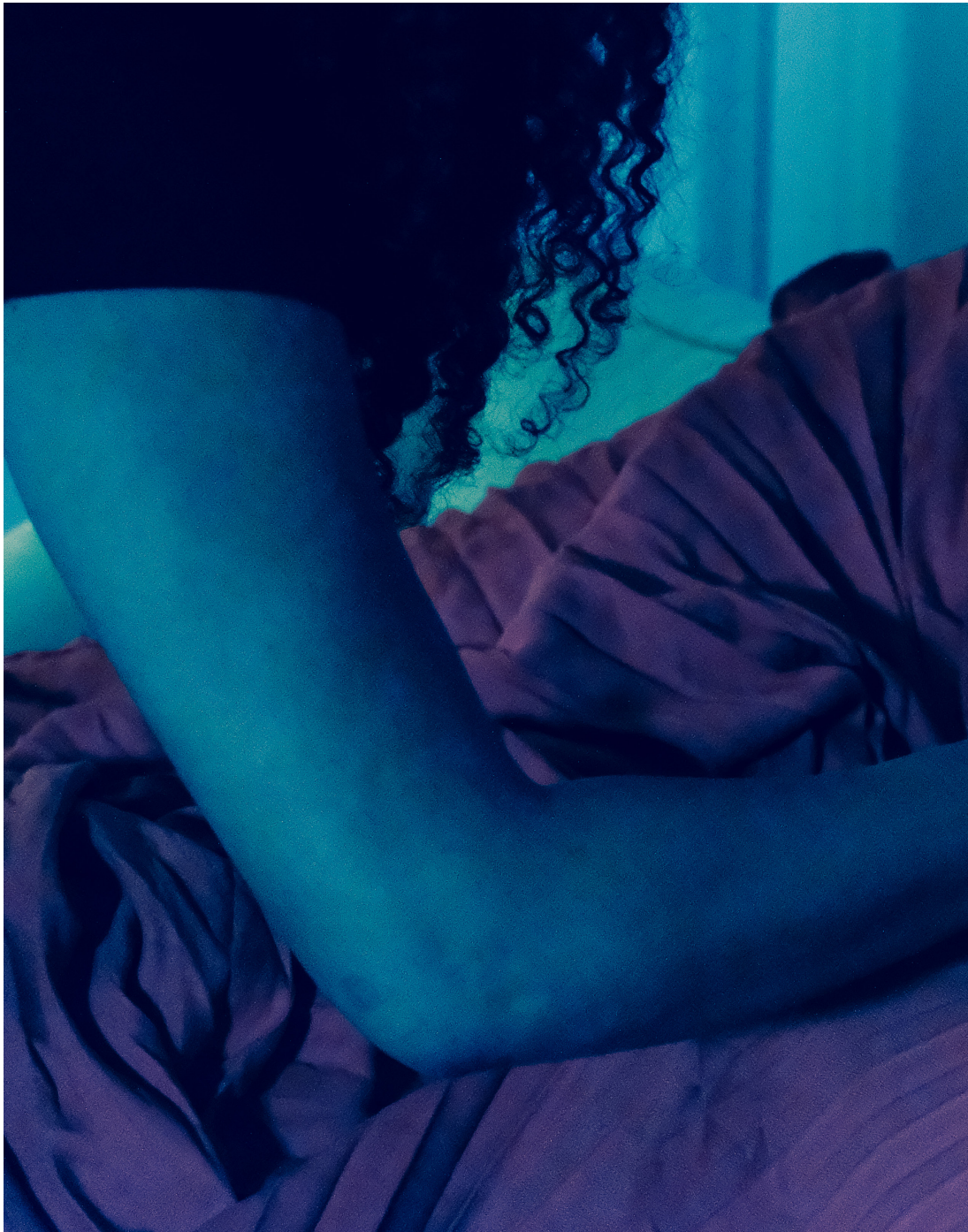
6.

Men who saw bells fat as oxen  
drop through bell towers in flames  
after a month lay scattered, windblown  
in a thousand fields of snow.

7.

Marie Walewska spent two nights in Napoleon's bed  
on Elba, planning to stay, but he escorted her  
on the third night halfway back to the boat.  
In the locket she had inscribed: "Remember,  
when you cease to love me, that I love you still."







8.

The perfume of the violet is sweet, though brief  
because it numbs the nerve it touches.

9.

Declining the gift of the dead man's heart,  
the second empress wrote to a friend:  
"He did not treat me ill, as some  
suppose. I would have wished him  
many years of a contented life,  
if only he lived them far away from me."



### THE CORMORANT AT SNOOKS POND

After the mall tycoon paid experts to conclude  
that rainbow trout can survive in water like this,  
warm and rich from a wetlands, three years  
after they drained the pond, and excavators  
had sunk the bottom deep enough to please him,  
when masons had dressed the face of the levee  
for show with a stone wall high as a two-story house,  
when the water rose, and the fishery stocked it  
with yearlings in good health, a few days later,  
the trout were already slow, and a cormorant came  
to fish beside the dam. The mall tycoon keeps  
weakening with age, and now his trout are failing him.  
But the dam they built will outlast everyone living.

### INFORMATION, 1944

In Budapest, after the cherry blossoms  
fell, a colonel in the SS asked a leader  
from the Jewish underground  
to carry a message abroad: the SS  
would release one million Jews  
in exchange for ten thousand trucks  
and a thousand tons of tea, coffee, cocoa,  
and soap for soldiers on the Russian front.

“Blood for goods,” he called the exchange.  
Then he inverted the phrase  
for effect, “goods for blood.”

Almost no one herded onto the trains in Budapest  
knew then what the leaders of the resistance knew.  
In June, on a typical day at Auschwitz, more  
Jews died than soldiers in both armies fell  
in Normandy on D-Day, which was the sixth.

On the seventh, British intelligence met  
the Hungarian messenger’s train at Aleppo.  
He was trying to help his people, they thought,  
but the German offer had to be a trick.

From Aleppo the British took him  
to Cairo and questioned him,  
for four months. The diplomat  
in charge of refugees asked,  
“What shall I do with those million  
Jews? Where shall I put them?”

The British thought the exchange  
of blood for goods would be  
collusion against their ally Russia.  
As for the prisoners, some  
might be released, some not.  
Some might serve as human shields  
for the enemy. Those released might

cripple the Allies with the demand  
for medicine, shelter, transport, and food.  
The confusion would prolong the end of the war  
and undermine negotiations to follow.

Churchill declined the offer  
with indignation. Experts then, some of them,  
thought that the murder of Jews, exaggerated  
in propaganda, was reaching an end.

From mid-May into mid-July, in fact, the SS  
murdered four hundred thousand Hungarian Jews.

Still, the messenger twenty years later  
believed that the British assessment  
of “blood for goods” was correct.  
He died regretting his part in the offer.

### UNLIT KITCHEN, 5 AM

After the mist from last night's rain  
began to clear, the old man saw  
through a spider web  
on the fogged window,  
far down under the cedars  
a cloud on the pond  
lift into the daylight.